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A Proxy War or A Struggle for National Liberation: The Ideological Motivations and Human Rights Considerations of the United States-Contra Alliance

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A Proxy War or A Struggle for National Liberation:
The Ideological Motivations and Human Rights Considerations
of the United States-Contra Alliance

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Introduction

As I interact with and learn from people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, I am confronted with the reality that my internalization of information, as well as the kinds of information and the ways in which it is presented to me, is shaded by my own identity and how others perceive me. In understanding my own cultural lens, I recognize that my ethnicity, age, gender, and upbringing have—and will continue to have—a profound impact on my worldview. I am a Caucasian woman originally from a suburban neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. I am currently 21 years old and am studying political science and philosophy at Wesleyan University, a private liberal arts university in Connecticut.

I believe that one of the most important aspects of my personal bias is recognizing the extent to which I am influenced by people who have shared their stories with me, both in passing and through ongoing relationships. As Sister Peggy of El Salvador (by way of New Jersey) says, we are social creations—each of our identities is a conglomeration of the many individuals with whom we come into contact. Each person shapes us, if we are open to being shaped, by describing to us his or her personal experiences and unique perspective on the world. The people with whom I have come into contact have collectively taught me that in every situation, multiple sides exist to the same story and that it is necessary to be open to them all. It is with that sentiment that I enter into my research—in seeking to understand the complexities of war and the attempts at limiting violence through moral imperatives.

After finishing high school, I lived in Jerusalem, Israel for one year where I participated in a program that was meant to mentally prepare Israelis for serving in the

army. My experiences there illuminated the notion that the military and war, as well as a commitment to justice and compassion, are deeply rooted in the Israeli mentality and culture. I therefore began to think profoundly about the ability of morality to potentially restrict the scope of violence during war so that civilians are kept safe. Since I have come to the unfortunate realization that war will always exist, I have become interested in investigating the ability of powerful countries, such as the United States, to constrain the damage war inevitably inflicts on civilian populations.

My question originally concentrated on the United States' moral responsibility in funding proxy armies in terms of the relative precautions taken when enlisting proxy troops as opposed to U.S. troops. I theorized that the United States would be less careful with proxy armies than they would be with U.S. soldiers since losing U.S. lives overseas would cause greater public outcry than would losing lives of "others" in the form of electoral pressure. I imagined that considerations for entering into war using a proxy army would most emphasize the army's chance of winning, as opposed to potential soldier fatalities. I learned, however, that although the United States may not weigh the same issues equally among U.S. and proxy armies, it does work to ensure that its foreign troops are well equipped and cared for in order to ensure their success. The United States, for example, supplied the Contras with, among other things, expensive military technology, comfortable living arrangements, high-quality food, and strategic aerial photos in order to aid their fight.¹

My principle question therefore has shifted from how the United States supports its proxy troops to how it maintains a helpful, yet distant, relationship with the army it funds, as well as how it ensures the just treatment of the opposing forces and of civilians

¹ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. New York: H. Holt, 1991. Pages 82, 85

during war. Thus, my research will address the Contra forces' motivations for fighting, their perceptions of the United States, and their considerations for human rights issues. I will begin with a brief history of Nicaraguan politics and Cold War dynamics, including an explanation of the military strategy of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC), which was a common United States tactic among Cold War-related proxy conflicts in the 1980s.²

Methodology

During my research, I spent the majority of my time in Managua, where I conducted interviews with former Contras and collected background information on the political dynamics at play both nationally in Nicaragua and internationally with respect to the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. I was able to find material in books, articles, government publications, and declassified United States political documents. I also spent three days in Esteli, one day in Jinotega, and one day in Matagalpa where I interviewed other former Contras, as well as individuals who are knowledgeable about human rights issues within the Contra forces. I asked interviewees questions pertaining to their motivations for fighting with the Contras, their perceptions of the United States' involvement in the war, and their familiarity with human rights regulations in the army. I digitally recorded each interview to review afterwards and took detailed notes during the meetings themselves.

² Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*. New York: Pantheon, 1988. Page 3

Limitations

The greatest limitation to my study is the inadequate access to information about U.S. governmental policy and the U.S. government's relationship with the Nicaraguan Contra military leadership. Although I was able to consult various declassified U.S. government documents and investigative books, the topics addressed in them are by no means exhaustive. Furthermore, I assume that the sensitive nature of discussing human rights concerns with the Contra interviewees, which could potentially carry personal ramifications, may have restricted the type of information I was able to receive. Although all of the individuals I interviewed spoke candidly about their experiences, I imagine that they held back from revealing certain unfavorable aspects of their military service.

Profiles of Interviewees

Rosibel Irías Aceredo – Director of Las Comisiones de Justicia y Paz de la Diócesis de Estelí (CJPE)

Judy Butler – Published author on Atlantic Coast history and politics

Róger Espinoza Coronel, nom de guerre “Ranchero” – Former Contra commander and current President of the Asociación de Discapacitados de la Resistencia Nicaragüense (ADRN)

Luis Frank Zelaya Escalante – Volunteer with the Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos (ANPDH) of Estelí

Azucena Ferrey – Social Christian Party member of the Nicaraguan Resistance political directorate

Luis Fley, nom de guerre “Comandante Johnson” – Former Contra commander and the
Contra Army’s Chief Legal Prosecutor

Mercedes Fley – Human rights activist and leader of Mothers of Political Prisoners

Oscar Manuel Salbavarro Garcia, nom de guerre “Comandante Rubén – Former Contra
commander

Edén Pastora Gomez, nom de guerre “Comandante Cero” – Leader and commander of
The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE)

Antonio Hodgson – Former Contra fighter in Kakabila, Atlantic Coast

Johnny Hodgson – Representative of the political party for the Región Autónoma del
Atlántico Sur (RAAS)

Fanor Perez Mejra, nom de guerre “Hombrito” – Former Contra commander and current
leader of the civil FDN branch in Jinotega

Roberto Petray – Executive Director of the Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos
Humanos (ANPDH)

Felix Pedro Cruz Rodríguez, nom de guerre “Comandante Gehu” – Former Contra
commander and volunteer with the Asociación de Discapacitados de la
Resistencia Nicaragüense (ADRN)

Maximino Rodriguez, nom de guerre “Comandante Wilmer” – Former Contra
commander and President of the Military Justice Tribunal

Jasper Theodore Swartz – Member of the territorial government of Kakabila and the
Kakabila community judge

Paul Swartz – former Contra fighter in Kakabila, Atlantic Coast

Noel Vardez, nom de guerre “Brack” – Former Contra fighter and current leader of the civil FDN branch in Matagalpa

Pedro Jose Mora Zapata, nom de guerre “Doctor Orlando,” or Doctor Mora – Former Contra medical doctor

Germán Zeledón, nom de guerre “El Enano” – Former Contra commander and former mayor of Jinotega for the PLC party

History

Nicaraguan History

After Nicaragua became independent in 1838, civil wars constantly erupted between the liberal elite of León and the conservative elite of Granada.³ In 1855, the first involvement of a North American in Nicaraguan affairs came with the liberal party’s invitation for William Walker to lead their fight against the conservatives. Shortly after Walker forcefully established himself as president, the majority of Nicaragua, as well as Honduras and Costa Rica, united to drive Walker out of the country in 1857, after which time the conservatives ruled for 30 years. In 1893, the liberal José Santos Zelaya staged a military coup and took over the government, maintaining power until 1909 when the United States provided support to the conservatives for his overthrow. The United States at the time was pursuing a monopoly over canals through Central America and as it already controlled the Panama Canal, it wanted to ensure that France would not make a deal with President Zelaya to construct a canal through Nicaragua. From 1910 to 1926, the conservative party, headed by the Chamorro family, controlled the government of Nicaragua with the help of the U.S. Marines, who occupied Nicaragua from 1912 until

³ Dora Maria Telléz: La Historia de Nicaragua, parte dos. 14 Febrero 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

1933. In 1914, the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, which gave the United States complete jurisdiction over the territory of the Nicaraguan canal. The United States removed its marines in 1925, only to reinstate them in 1926 due to another civil war between the liberals and conservatives, entitled the Constitutional War. In 1927, the United States brokered an agreement called the Pacto de Espino Negro to resolve the civil war and promised to remain in Nicaragua to oversee the 1928 elections and organize a non-partisan police force, which eventually became the *Guardia Nacional*, or the Nicaraguan National Guard. Although most politicians and fighters agreed to sign the pact, Augusto César Sandino refused and instead continued fighting against the U.S. Marines with his small guerrilla army. Due to the Great Depression and casualties inflicted by Sandino's forces, the United States ultimately removed the marines in 1933. A year later, the head of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, assassinated Sandino and destroyed his army, and in 1936 established himself as a military dictator.

The Somoza dynasty was entirely backed by the United States and lasted from 1936 until 1979, with Anastasio Somoza Garcia handing down power to his eldest son Luis Somoza Debayle who was then succeeded by his younger brother, Anastasio Somoza Debayle. The three dictators were infamous for their corruption and heavy-handed repression, but it was only after the 1972 earthquake, which destroyed most of Managua, that Anastasio Somoza Debayle's power began to be contested. After the earthquake, Somoza used most of the relief funds donated to Nicaragua to build luxury homes for himself and his National Guardsmen instead of to rebuild houses for the poor. Business people also became frustrated with Somoza's tight monopolies on reconstruction industries that would not allow for market competition. As time went on

and discontent grew, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which was founded in 1961 on the liberation ideology of Sandino, became increasingly more powerful. Furthermore, the National Guard's severe repression of civilians believed to be working with the Sandinistas caused the Catholic Church to discontinue their support of Somoza. After Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the outspoken editor of the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*, was killed in 1978 and U.S. reporter Bill Stewart was killed in 1979, both by the National Guard, President Jimmy Carter decided to withdraw United States support of Somoza, which led to Somoza's defeat just a few months later.⁴

After the FSLN came to power through a provisional 7-person junta government, the Sandinistas began to enact social programs aimed at helping the poverty stricken population. In 1980, they organized a national literacy crusade in which 30,000 university students from the cities went to rural areas of the country to teach adults and children, allegedly reducing illiteracy in the country from 52% to 12% in 8 months.⁵ The Sandinistas also introduced a language of rights into law, including the freedom of expression, personal security, and women's rights, as well as providing universal healthcare and establishing a national labor code. As part of their economic plan, the Sandinistas expropriated land from certain relatively wealthy farm owners to redistribute it to *campesinos*, poor agricultural farmers, whom they organized into government-controlled cooperatives. Less favorably, they also limited the media and repressed anti-Sandinista sentiment throughout the country in an attempt to unify Nicaragua under a single revolutionary government. The FSLN was heavily supported by the Soviet Union

⁴ Aynn Setright: The Revolution of the 1980s and 90s. 26 February 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

⁵ Aynn Setright: The Revolution of the 1980s and 90s. 26 February 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

and Cuba at the time, especially after the United States placed an embargo on Nicaragua in 1985, which curtailed all trade between the two countries.

Beginning in 1981, the counterrevolutionary forces, or the Contra (also called *La Resistencia*) began to organize in response to unfavorable Sandinista policies. This coincided with the 1981 election of President Reagan, a staunch believer in the global threat of Communism to the “free world.” Thus, noting the socialist bent of the FSLN government, the United States began funding the Contra forces, slowly increasing aid throughout the 1980s. In order to respond to what they perceived as continued United States aggression against Nicaragua through neocolonialist economic policy and proxy troops, the Sandinistas spent much of the national budget on defense and eventually instituted a draft of boys from age 16 into the Sandinista People’s Army, which became increasingly unpopular among the Nicaraguan population.

Cold War History

“It is very important for the American people to know that this is a dangerous world; that we live at risk and that this nation is at risk in a dangerous world.”

Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North,

Director of the National Security Council’s Counterterrorism and Low-Intensity Warfare Group,
at the Joint House-Senate Select Committee on Iran and the Contras in July 1987⁶

After the conclusion of World War II in 1945, the two major world superpowers emerged as the once-allied United States and Soviet Union. Despite their cooperation during the world war, the two countries’ economic and political differences led them to develop separate spheres of influence that polarized most of the world into a fight between the seemingly opposing ideologies of Capitalism and Communism. The United

⁶ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 4

States and the powerful Western European countries created a military alliance through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact and established the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) among the Eastern Bloc of communist countries in Eastern Europe.

A significant aspect of the struggle for power and ultimate economic and political hegemony between the United States and the Soviet Union was the competition for control over “Third World” countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia throughout the mid-1900s until 1991. President Harry S. Truman, in his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1949, introduced the new “Point Four Program” using humanitarian terms. He asserted that the program would “provide technical assistance to poor peoples in the ‘underdeveloped areas’ whose ‘economic life is primitive and stagnant.’ The President extolled self-help, the expansion of private foreign investment, and greater production to achieve ‘prosperity and peace.’”⁷ During this particularly volatile time, both the United States and the Soviet Union interpreted internal national revolutions as proxy battlegrounds for their own international ideological war.

The United States under President Ronald Reagan was convinced of its obligation to fight Communism in Central America, as it was believed that Communist victories would disrupt the established world order and undermine the power of the United States. According to President Reagan,

“The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble,

⁷ Thomas G. Paterson. *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Page 147.

and the safety of our homeland would be put at jeopardy. We have a vital interest, a moral duty, and solemn responsibility...”⁸

United States foreign policy in Central America the 1980s, therefore, was fully focused on curbing the Communist threat so as to stem the feared “domino effect” of states falling to Communism after their neighbors turned Communist. Thus, the United States did not view domestic revolutionary movements as emanating from historical frustrations or national aspirations; rather, they were contextualized in the simple dichotomous story of pro- or anti-United States. The Department of State and the Department of Defense’s 1986 publication, “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America,” outlines the United States government’s mentality during the 1980s regarding Central America’s role in the Cold War:

“The people of [Central America] are facing the loss of their freedom if their governments fall to Communist-backed guerrillas attempting to seize power. The United States is also facing a threat to its security and economic well-being as a result of Soviet expansionism. The strategic goal of the Soviet Union is to force the United States to divert political attention and military resources to its critical Southern Flank, and away from areas of the world vital to the Soviets. To achieve this goal, the Soviets and their proxies, Cuba and Nicaragua, are arming, training, and

⁸ President Ronald Reagan before Joint Session of Congress, April 1983. “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America,” Department of State and Department of Defense, 2nd printing. October, 1986. Washington, DC. Page 1

increasingly controlling Marxist-Leninist guerrillas, most notably in El Salvador, but in other Central American countries as well...”⁹

The United States viewed Nicaragua in particular as a great potential threat to the stability of the entire Central American region. The Reagan Administration viewed Nicaragua as “a betrayed revolution—a country on the Soviet Union’s ‘hit-list’ ... that had gone ‘Communist.’”¹⁰ According to “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America,” the Soviets gave more than \$600 million to Nicaragua in “war-making material” and more than \$4 billion to Cuba in “jet fighters, tanks, warships, surface-to-air missiles, and other tools of war,” not including the cost of training, since 1980.¹¹ In comparison, the United States had given only \$1 billion in military assistance and training to all of Central America during the same period. Thus, the United States claimed, “militarization of the region can... be traced to Moscow, not Washington.”¹²

It is in that atmosphere of acute fear of losing its position of hegemony in a politically and economically polarized world that the United States began to fund the counterrevolutionary guerrilla forces, or the Contra, in Nicaragua in 1981 against the Soviet-backed Sandinista government.

⁹ “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America,” Department of State and Department of Defense, 2nd printing. October, 1986. Washington, DC. Page 1

¹⁰ Thomas G. Paterson. *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan*. Page 257

¹¹ “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America,” Department of State and Department of Defense, 2nd printing. October, 1986. Washington, DC. Page 3

¹² “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America,” Department of State and Department of Defense, 2nd printing. October, 1986. Washington, DC. Page 3

Low Intensity Conflict (LIC)

United States Strategy

In the Cold War climate of the 1980s, especially during the Reagan Administration, the United States adopted a new military strategy called “Low Intensity Conflict” (LIC) to contain the spreading threat of Communism. The 1986 Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project Final Report defines LIC strategy as “diplomatic, economic, and military support for either a government under attack by insurgents or an insurgent force seeking freedom from an adversary government.”¹³ The nomenclature of “Low Intensity Conflict” comes from a theoretical “spectrum of conflict” that defines “low” levels of conflict as “guerrilla wars and other limited conflicts fought with irregular units,” “medium” levels as “regional wars fought with modern weapons,” and “high” levels as “a global nonnuclear conflagration or a nuclear engagement.”¹⁴ LIC is different from past U.S. military tactics in that it does not only consist of regular military operations, but also involves “the coordinated integration of economic assistance with psychological operations and security measures”¹⁵ designed to destabilize Socialist-leaning governments and guerrilla forces. According to Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh,

“LIC begins with counterinsurgency, and extends to a wide variety of other politicomilitary operations, both over and covert...” that “represents a strategic reorientation of the U.S. military establishment, and a renewed

¹³ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 7

¹⁴ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 6-7

¹⁵ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 6

commitment to employ force in a global crusade against Third World revolutionary movements and governments.”¹⁶

The United States viewed the Soviet Union as exploiting economic and political instability in “Third World Countries” in order to challenge U.S. hegemony and compromise its access to natural resources and strategic economic markets. Thus, U.S. military strategists perceived that the war against the Soviet Union was really manifested in many smaller battles on the soil of less developed countries as opposed to in Europe, thereby requiring the U.S. to undermine any and all perceived allies of the USSR abroad.

In 1987, President Reagan institutionalized Low Intensity Conflict as the primary national military strategy by establishing a “Board for Low Intensity Conflict” within the National Security Council and signing a classified National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 277.¹⁷ The NSDD’s stated objective was to “promulgate a national policy and strategy for Low Intensity Conflict, identify resources for implementing the strategy, and define a consistent and lasting approach for interagency planning and coordination.”¹⁸ The directive also outlined U.S. strategy for supporting insurgency resistance forces, which included “taking advantage of selected resistance movements to gain leverage against hostile regimes,” “avoiding ‘Americanizing’ resistance movements” so they do not “become permanently dependent on external support,” and “conveying to movements and their adversaries that the U.S. has a long-term commitment to achieving a favorable outcome.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 3

¹⁷ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 6

¹⁸ National Security Decision Directive Number 277: National Policy and Strategy for Low Intensity Conflict. June 15, 1987. Page 1. See Appendix for full NSDD report.

¹⁹ National Security Decision Directive Number 277: National Policy and Strategy for Low Intensity Conflict. June 15, 1987. Page 5

After the Vietnam War in the 1960s, public opinion in the United States became exceedingly anti-interventionist given the magnitude of losses incurred. In the wake of the war, congressional oversight of the CIA was legislated and the “Wars Powers Act” was passed, which prohibited future presidents from deploying U.S. troops abroad for extended periods of time without congressional approval.²⁰ The public was no longer willing to risk American lives or to commit huge portions of their tax dollars to conflicts overseas. For that reason, the strategy of Low Intensity Conflict allowed the Reagan administration to “wage a war not defined as such. No draft would be necessary; few soldiers would be deployed, and even fewer would be sent home in body bags.”²¹ Thus, LIC became a means by which the United States could intervene abroad without being forced to cope with the negative consequences of employing U.S. troops, which would undoubtedly have fostered greater opposition at home.

Contra Perceptions of LIC

Most of the individuals whom I interviewed, despite having been directly trained by the United States and/or having served as commanders in the Contra army, did not recognize the term Low Intensity Conflict (or its Spanish equivalent: “*Guerra de Baja Intensidad*”). Of those who did, some surmised that it was connected to the Cold War in which the United States needed to fight to keep the Soviets away from its border,²² while others asserted that LIC was a psychological strategy employed by the Soviets to control Nicaragua and the rest of Central America.²³ Former Contra Noel Vardez, nom de guerre

²⁰ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 13

²¹ Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh. *Low Intensity Warfare*. Page 9

²² Germán Zeledón (nom de guerre “El Enano”). Interview on April 25, 2012. Jinotega, Nicaragua.

²³ Roberto Petray. Interview on April 23, 2012. Esteli, Nicaragua.

“Comandante Brack,” identified LIC as the tactic used during the Cold War by both the United States and the Soviet Union to control territories that would be strategically beneficial to spreading their respective ideologies.²⁴ The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) leader, Edén Pastora, more precisely recognized LIC as the “strategy of the United States to obligate the Frente [Sandinista] to negotiate with them.”²⁵ Edén observed that the United States never gave the Contras sufficient arms to achieve a military victory; rather, it sustained the Contras’ fight just enough to pressure the Sandinista government to negotiate. In that way, the United States could obtain the political control it desired to assert a “democratic,” anti-Communist system in Nicaragua. Many former Contras I interviewed claimed that their ultimate goal was a complete military victory over the Sandinistas, but that the United States was more interested in negotiating with the government for political influence.

The Contra Identity

La Resistencia Nicaragüense, or the Contra army, was comprised of numerous diverse groups of individuals who harbored unique grievances against the Sandinistas and maintained distinct economic and political ideologies, yet were united in their opposition to the revolutionary government that took control of the country in 1979 after Somoza’s overthrow. As a complete account of every Contra faction would be an exhaustive project and could merit an entire book in and of itself, I will examine only the three largest groups that composed the armed counterrevolutionary movement: (1) The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (*Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática*, ARDE); (2) Yapti Tasba

²⁴ Noel Vardez (nom de guerre “Brack”). Interview on April 26, 2012. Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

²⁵ Edén Pastora Gomez (nom de guerre “Comandante Cero”). Interview on May 3, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua. Translation by author.

Masraka Nanih Asla Takanka (YATAMA, literally "Organization of the Nations of Mother Earth"); and (3) The Nicaraguan Democratic Force (*Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense*, FDN).

The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE)

Formed under the command of former Sandinista Edén Pastora Gómez at the end of 1982, ARDE fought the Sandinistas on the southern front of Nicaragua with approximately 6,000 soldiers. The ranks were comprised of Pacific lowlanders who were “mostly rural peasants or urban workers of Pacific lowland origin...who had been moved in the 1930s to the region of Nueva Guinea in the Atlantic lowlands.”²⁶ The leaders of ARDE were upper and middle class intellectuals who maintained leftist social and economic ideologies that differed greatly from those of the majority of FDN leaders. Despite attempts to unify under a single headquarters, “the ethnic, historical, geographic, and social differences between the FDN and the Southern Front were simply too deep to be bridged,”²⁷ for ARDE fighters did not identify as counterrevolutionary “Contra,” but rather as pro-revolutionary anti-Sandinistas. ARDE received a total of \$1 million in military and humanitarian aid from the CIA from 1982 until 1984, as well as support from Panama and individuals in Venezuela and Mexico. Pastora claimed that although he was sent funds by the United States, he did not make any commitment to forge a political alliance; rather, he maintained a “love-hate relationship” with the CIA because he was

²⁶ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2001. Page 250, endnote 30

²⁷ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 250, endnote 30

using them to fund his fight against the Sandinista government while they were using him to fight their proxy war against the Soviets.²⁸

Motivations

According to Pastora, ARDE fought to defend true Sandinismo against the perversions of the revolutionary Sandinista government that was moving away from Socialism and toward “Stalinism.”²⁹ He observed that the Sandinistas were violating human rights, most significantly freedom of the press and the liberty to organize politically. Furthermore, Pastora contended that the Sandinistas should not have made political commitments to the Soviets after the revolution, whereby forming a dangerous alliance during the Cold War. Instead, he maintained that the Sandinista government could have relied solely on support from countries like Italy, Spain, Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, and Colombia. In order to realize his goal of instituting “changes in liberty and democracy” in the government, Pastora saw three options: first, attempt to make the Sandinistas understand his position; second, to allow the FDN to take over the south where he was convinced “they would kill everyone”; or third, to fight the Sandinistas militarily with help from the United States. Since Edén perceived no space for a non-violent, civil battle with the Sandinistas, he felt that his only viable option was to assemble his own army and fight.³⁰

²⁸ Edén Pastora Gomez (nom de guerre “Comandante Cero”). Interview on May 3, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

²⁹ Edén Pastora Gomez (nom de guerre “Comandante Cero”). Interview on May 3, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

³⁰ Edén Pastora Gomez (nom de guerre “Comandante Cero”). Interview on May 3, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka (YATAMA)

YATAMA was the 5,000-person counterrevolutionary movement on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, which was largely comprised of the indigenous Miskito, Sumo, and Rama people. They fought mostly in northern Zelaya (present-day Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte, or RAAN) as well as in a few communities in southern parts of the Caribbean Coast. YATAMA was originally developed from the pro-Sandinista organization called Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, Sandinistas Working Together (MISURASATA),³¹ which was created in 1979 to replace the indigenous organization, Alliance for the Progress of the Miskito and Sumu Peoples (ALPROMISU),³² to work with the new Sandinista government on indigenous issues.³³ The three leaders of MISURASATA, Stedman Fagoth, Brooklyn Rivera, and Hazel Lau, were all Miskito community leaders. In January 1981, Fagoth declared “open political war” on the Sandinistas and enlisted the support of young Miskito men, as well as Miskito community pastors for his guerrilla movement, which he named MISURA.³⁴ Later that same year, Rivera formed his own Miskito military organization comprised of many MISURA dissidents, which he continued to call MISURASATA.³⁵ By mid-1983, despite animosity between Rivera and Fagoth, the fighters in MISURA and MISURASATA felt, “we were fighting for our people, not for leaders, so that here in the mountains we were going to unite both forces in one single struggle.”³⁶ In June 1987, the U.S. State Department

³¹ Miskito, Sumu, Rama Sandinista Asla Takanka

³² Alianza para el Progreso de los Pueblos Miskitos y Sumus, active from 1972-1979

³³ Judy Butler, Interview on April 11, 2012. Bordoña Dicuantepé, Nicaragua

³⁴ The same acronym as MISURASATA, but without “Sandinista Working Together.”

³⁵ Judy Butler, Unpublished Manuscript, 1991. Page 52-53

³⁶ Judy Butler, Unpublished Manuscript, 1991. Page 57

formally unified the indigenous forces fighting on the Atlantic Coast into YATAMA, which later became the indigenous political party in 1990.³⁷

Motivations

In January and February 1982, Sandinistas unexpectedly evacuated 20,000 Moskitos living in Rio Coco in the Northern Atlantic Coast and militarized the border with Honduras in an attempt to prevent MISURA from establishing a base inside Nicaragua. The villagers' homes and animals were destroyed and they could only carry few possessions with them to their new territory. Moreover, they were relocated to land that was geographically different from their previous homes, which made survival difficult.³⁸ This event became known as "Red Christmas" (*Navidad Roja*) and served as a justification for Moskito participation in the Contra forces against the Sandinistas.

According to former Contras living in the southern coastal Moskito community of Kakabila, however, their primary motivation for fighting the Sandinistas was to gain "autonomy."

Johnny Hodgson,³⁹ the leader of the committee of community representatives that was tasked with defining indigenous aspirations for coastal autonomy, claimed that once the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, they made a commitment that Moskito people would be fully incorporated in the construction of the "new Nicaragua." Sandinistas went to Moskito communities to learn about the communities' problems and found that the Moskitos wanted equality in Nicaragua and the ability to elect their own coastal government. The Sandinistas therefore agreed that if the people of the Atlantic Coast created a proposal for autonomy, they would negotiate new legislation. Hodgson's

³⁷ Judy Butler, Unpublished Manuscript, 1991. Page 71

³⁸ Judy Butler, Unpublished Manuscript, 1991. Page 54

³⁹ Johnny Hodgson. Interview on March 26, 2012. Bluefields, Nicaragua.

committee eventually was able to distill numerous diverse versions of autonomy into just two different concepts: “indigenous autonomy,” and “intercultural autonomy.” According to Johnny, the proponents of indigenous autonomy fought with the Contras to advance their position, while the proponents of intercultural autonomy fought with the Sandinistas.⁴⁰

Former Contras in Kakabila articulated their rationale for fighting in less nuanced terms, however. For example, Paul Swartz, a coconut farmer and former Contra, explained that he decided to fight because he wanted “autonomy” for his community, despite the fact that it required him to fight against people in his own town.⁴¹ When I asked him specifically about indigenous versus intercultural autonomy, he did not seem to recognize either term. Paul’s general responses indicated that he had decided to fight with the Contras because he felt that the Sandinistas were not working toward developing coastal autonomy, though he asserted that he stopped fighting once he realized the damage the violence was causing in Kakabila.

Jasper Theodore Swartz,⁴² a current member of the territorial government of Kakabila and the Kakabila community judge, asserted that Brooklyn Rivera fought vehemently against the Sandinistas for the autonomy of the Atlantic Coast and compelled Ortega to promise to grant coastal autonomy when the war ended by enforcing Law 445, which states that “Moskitos should have the right to administrate what is theirs.”⁴³ Jasper explained that in 1905 the Harrison-Altamirano treaty gave the indigenous communities

⁴⁰ According to Johnny, the two sides eventually stopped fighting with the signing of a six-line definition of autonomy that explains the term as: “recognition and effective exercise of historical rights of indigenous peoples and ethnic communities of the Caribbean Coast in the context of national unity and the constitutional principles.”

⁴¹ Paul Swartz: Interview on March 28, 2012. Kakabila, Nicaragua.

⁴² Jasper Theodore Swartz: Multiple interviews on: March 28 and 29, 2012. Kakabila, Nicaragua.

⁴³ The complete Law 445 may be found at: <http://www.manfut.org/RAAN/ley445.html>

the title to their land so that they could administer it as they desired. Since the Moskito people spoke their own distinct language and had their own culture and history, not to mention a unique legal right to the land, they did not identify with Crioles or Garifuna who were not entirely indigenous to the Atlantic Coast. In this respect, many Moskitos fought for their own community's control over coastal territory rather than for combined control by all ethnic communities since they believed that they maintained a more significant claim to the land, despite not using the term "indigenous autonomy" to describe their aspiration.

Jasper, however, claimed that most Contras on the coast did not have a clear understanding of why they were fighting, for they were only acting on their perception that that the Sandinistas in power still had not granted them autonomy after the revolution. Regardless, their goals were completely separate from those of the FDN who were fighting against the national threat of Communism and ineffective Sandinista policies that affected campesinos on the Pacific Coast.

Antonio Hodgson, another former Contra soldier from Kakabila, provided a different perspective than that of Jasper in many respects.⁴⁴ He began by explaining his objective for fighting as aspiring "to have autonomy as a Miskito nation" because he believed that once the Spaniards came to Moskitia, the Moskito people's rights were limited severely from when they lived under a king. He claimed that Somoza did not provide access to education or adequate medical care and instead exploited the coast's natural resources (their "richness") so that the Moskito communities did not see any of the profit. The Moskitos therefore took up arms against Somoza and won, only to fight again against the Sandinistas whom they viewed as similarly exploiting their resources.

⁴⁴ Antonio Hodgson. Interview on March 30, 2012. Kakabila, Nicaragua.

According to Antonio, the Moskitos joined the Contra forces “to administrate what is ours,” while he contended that those who joined the Sandinistas were poorly educated and were therefore susceptible to propaganda. Antonio claimed that YATAMA was fighting for the autonomy of everyone on the coast, as opposed to only for the indigenous communities, and that his Contra army was fighting a completely separate war from that of the FDN on the Pacific Coast. He said that soldiers in the FDN “were fighting for I don’t know what... to take over the Ortega government,” and that they never even went to the coast to fight.⁴⁵

In truth, it seems that the only similarity between YATAMA and the FDN was that they were both fighting against the sitting Sandinista government in some fashion, for the Sandinista policies with which they disagreed were entirely distinct.

Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN)

The FDN was the largest Contra army fighting on the Pacific Coast, eventually numbering approximately 24,000 soldiers at the time of disarmament in 1990.⁴⁶ It was created in 1981 with the unification of ex-National Guardsmen with former Sandinista supporters from the campo. Many campesinos had previously joined the Sandinistas’ fight against the Somoza dictatorship, participating through small guerrilla groups called the People’s Anti-Somoza Militias (*Militias Populares Anti-Somocistas*, MILPAS); however, soon after the Sandinistas took over the government, many campesinos became disillusioned by revolutionary policies and decided to fight against the government, changing the MILPAS acronym to stand for the People’s Anti-Sandinista Militias

⁴⁵ Antonio Hodgson. Interview on March 30, 2012. Kakabila, Nicaragua.

⁴⁶ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 114

(*Militias Populares Anti-Sandinistas*).⁴⁷ Former Guardia soldiers who had been exiled after the fall of Somoza began to organize in parts of Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and, most notably, in Guatemala as the September 15 Legion (*Legión 15 de Septiembre*) in 1979.⁴⁸ The FDN was mostly active in the north of Nicaragua, especially around the border with Honduras, while some ex-Guardia Contra troops fought in the south near Costa Rica as well. By the end of the war, it was found that between 8,500 and 10,500 FDN Comandos were killed in battle and that all together, about 45,000-50,000 Nicaraguans had fought with the FDN at some time during the 1980s.⁴⁹ Amid widespread rumors that the Contra were forcing people to fight in the army, the United States contracted a professional sociologist to investigate the veracity of the claim. He ultimately found “no evidence of forced recruitment,”⁵⁰ though granted his investigation served the interests of the U.S. government, as opposed to an independent organization. Furthermore, according to the Organization of American States’ (OAS) International Commission for Support and Verification (CIAV), the FDN was comprised of 97% campesinos, 64% of whom had no formal schooling, and only 1% former Guardia.⁵¹ In speaking to former Contra fighters, I learned that many soldiers were in their early teens, some even as young as 12 years old, when they first joined *La Resistencia*.

When I asked my interviewees about the relationship between ex-Guardia and campesino soldiers in the FDN, I received varying responses. Some told me that their rapport was fairly calm and that they were all fighting for the same ideal of improving the country, while others told me that they did not get along at all. Although being the

⁴⁷ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 13-14

⁴⁸ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 69

⁴⁹ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 115

⁵⁰ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 115

⁵¹ Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War*. Page 115-116

minority, the ex-Guardia occupied most of the leadership positions since they had more military experience and the campesinos recognized the need for organized military training. According to many interviewees, most ex-Guardia soldiers came from families with poor campo roots, so they easily shared the same ideology as the campesino soldiers.⁵² Despite their apparent unity, however, most ex-Guardia had been removed from the FDN by 1988, for the United States and the Nicaraguan Contra leadership were looking to construct a “pueblo” image of campesinos fighting for their rights against a government they once supported.⁵³ Even as early as 1982, ex-Guardia fighters were being taken out of FDN troop pictures because of the image they wanted to “sell to the Americans.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, former Contra, Comandante Johnson, claimed that ex-Guardia soldiers were particularly violent against the civilian population, which offended the campesino soldiers who were trying to “liberate Nicaragua.” This difference in behavior also contributed to the ex-Guardia being almost entirely phased out of the FDN.⁵⁵

Motivations

As former Contra Noel Valdez explained, the Contras had “20,000 different reasons to fight.”⁵⁶ They were a reactionary group without a clear ideology of their own that was unified only in their desire to “liberate Nicaragua” from what they perceived to be a restrictive revolutionary government.⁵⁷

⁵² Pedro Jose Mora Zapata (nom de guerre “Doctor Orlando”), or Doctor Mora. Interview on April 24, 2012. Esteli, Nicaragua.

⁵³ Germán Zeledón (nom de guerre “El Enano”). Interview on April 25, 2012. Jinotega, Nicaragua.

⁵⁴ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 72

⁵⁵ Luis Fley (nom de guerre “Comandante Johnson”). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

⁵⁶ Noel Vardez (nom de guerre “Brack”). Interview on April 26, 2012. Matagalpa, Nicaragua. Translation by author.

⁵⁷ Maximino Rodriguez (nom de guerre “Comandante Wilmer”). Interview on May 2, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

Personal Grievances

Some Contras decided to fight as reactions to their experiences of having been personally targeted by the Sandinistas after Somoza's fall. Once they assumed power, the Sandinistas attempted to purge the country of all "Somocistas," which came to include anyone who had at any time worked even peripherally with the government. Comandante Rubén's father, for instance, had held a position in a community government and consequently had his land confiscated.⁵⁸ Similarly, Germán Zeledón's father, who had been in Somoza's National Guard until he decided to leave in 1972, was killed by the Sandinistas in 1979 for his previous participation.⁵⁹

Communist Threat

Other Contras were predominantly worried about the Communist ideology coming to define the political and economic policy of Nicaragua, which they believed would be detrimental to the development of the country. They felt that participating in the free market was necessary to promote economic growth and that democracy was severely lacking in civil society. Others viewed Communism as a foreign ideology that was limiting the autonomy of Nicaragua after Nicaraguans had struggled to determine their own political future just a few years before. They viewed the Sandinistas' acceptance of monetary and material aid from the Soviet Union as an affront to their sovereignty and they desired to govern their own affairs independent of foreign influence.

Poor Governmental Policy

Nearly all of the former Contras I interviewed also cited ineffective Sandinista policies as contributing to their motivations for fighting. They spoke about the Sandinista

⁵⁸ Oscar Manuel Salbavarro Garcia (nom de guerre "Comandante Rubén). Interview on April 18, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

⁵⁹ Germán Zeledón (nom de guerre "El Enano"). Interview on April 25, 2012. Jinotega, Nicaragua.

decision to confiscate the property of hacienda owners with the intention of redistributing it to poor campesinos as being detrimental in practice. Noel Valdez, for example, asserted that the Sandinistas had taken away land from his parents who had worked hard for many years to buy the property, in order to give it to Sandinista “militares.”⁶⁰ Former Contra, Doctor Mora, claimed that the Sandinistas “took out one poor person to replace with another poor person.”⁶¹ Many interviewees contended that the Sandinistas would specifically take the land of campesinos they had identified as being “anti-Sandinista,” which at the time automatically labeled them as Contras. Campesino farmers were also bothered by the cool, elitist attitude of the young revolutionaries who were put in charge of creating agricultural policy without demonstrating any understanding of campo life.⁶² The government would confiscate land from larger ranchers and physically remove the tenants from the land on which they had previously worked to relocate them to state-run cooperative farms where they were made to work collectively under the direction of the Sandinistas. The Ministry of Agrarian Reform did not provide farmers with much better pay or with greater opportunities than the patrones had beforehand, and the inexperienced Sandinista managers allowed farms to fall into disrepair despite the land “belonging” to the farmers. Furthermore, even when land was successfully given to poor campesinos, they were unable to procure agricultural equipment, quality seeds, or crop loans if they did not present membership credentials in a Sandinista cooperative.⁶³

⁶⁰ Noel Vardez (nom de guerre “Brack”). Interview on April 26, 2012. Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

⁶¹ Pedro Jose Mora Zapata (nom de guerre “Doctor Orlando”), or Doctor Mora. Interview on April 24, 2012. Esteli, Nicaragua.

⁶² Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. New York: H. Holt, 1991. Page 47

⁶³ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. New York: H. Holt, 1991. Page 48

Overwhelming Governmental Control

Despite all of the Contras' aforementioned complaints, the greatest grievance was their perception that the Sandinistas had shed their original revolutionary ideals and instead had begun to form an all-controlling, anti-democratic system of governance. Róger Espinoza Coronel asserted that he felt that the Sandinistas "wanted people to become robots" so that there would be no political dissent among the population.⁶⁴ To their understanding, there was no freedom of the press and no liberty to organize politically against the Sandinistas; anyone who attempted to speak out against the government would be threatened, imprisoned, disappeared, or assassinated. Campesinos who had no affiliation with the Contras would be kept in Sandinista prisons for months, often suffering from hunger, torture, and unsanitary living conditions and ultimately dying in prison or shortly after their release from tuberculosis, stomach cancer, or hemorrhages from beatings.⁶⁵ Although political debate within various sectors of civil society was initially encouraged as the revolution gathered momentum throughout the 1970s, after 1979 those who criticized government policies were bluntly considered anti-Sandinista and anti-revolutionary. For example, Mercedes Fley, who organized a group called Mothers of Political Prisoners, participated in a "Marcha de Dolor" (March of Pain) in 1986 that was forcefully broken up by armed Sandinistas.⁶⁶ After participating in a similar protest in 1987 of women against the draft, which suffered severe repression by Sandinista authorities, Azucena Ferrey was moved to accept a position in the Contra

⁶⁴ Róger Espinoza Coronel (nom de guerre "Ranchero"). Interview on April 24, 2012. Esteli, Nicaragua. Translation by author.

⁶⁵ Mercedes Fley. Interview on April 26, 2012. Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

⁶⁶ Mercedes Fley. Interview on April 26, 2012. Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

political directorate.⁶⁷ Neighborhoods too became dangerous for political dissidents. The Sandinista Defense Committee (CDS), which was once a forum for community participation, became the “eyes and ears of the revolution” so that Sandinista supporters came to report their “anti-Sandinista” neighbors to governmental authorities.⁶⁸ Interviewees also spoke about the long lines outside of stores and the sparse ration cards required to obtain basic necessities like food and toiletries, as well as the mandatory military service for boys from 16 years old as further examples of the Sandinistas’ assertion of total societal control. Boys at the time were afraid to leave their houses for fear of being forced into the Sandinista army, eventually choosing to fight for the Contras voluntarily instead of waiting until the Sandinistas came to take them away.

Intra-Contra Relationships

The three major resistance armies, ARDE, YATAMA, and the FDN maintained fairly distinct ideologies and therefore acted autonomously from one another, despite all being coordinated to some extent by the United States. The former FDN Contras whom I asked about the relationship between the three armies believed that the groups, while being culturally diverse, were all fighting for the same general goal of liberating Nicaragua and overthrowing Communism to bring democracy to their country. They acknowledged that they had little, if any, contact with the other groups, but they were convinced that they had support for their fight in all parts of the country. FDN Comandante Johnson claimed that the FDN was on good terms with YATAMA and maintained friendly relations with ARDE soldiers on the ground, but that FDN leaders

⁶⁷ Azucena Ferrey. Interview on May 1, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

⁶⁸ Envio, “CDS: Revolution in the Barrio.” Number 98, September 1989.
<<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2738>>

did not get along with ARDE commander Edén Pastora.⁶⁹ Pastora, for his part, asserted that he had no relations with the FDN or with Stedman Fagoth's MISURA forces, and only little contact with Brooklyn Rivera's MISURASATA army, which he viewed as being more ideologically akin to his own group.⁷⁰

Who's War Was It Anyway?

United States Funding

In 1981, President Reagan authorized the CIA to begin covert operations in Nicaragua for which he allocated \$19.9 million to build a 500-man "action team" to undertake paramilitary activities.⁷¹ The United States gave increasing amounts of aid to the Contras through 1983 until Congress cut funding in 1984 after the CIA's secret mining of Nicaraguan harbors and prohibited the CIA from being involved in the war more extensively than solely providing intelligence information to the Contras. In the absence of congressional funds, Oliver North established a clandestine support network for the Contras with the help of the Reagan administration, procuring more than \$32 million in secret funding for the FDN by arranging for the Saudi Arabian government to deposit funds into the private bank accounts of Contra political leaders.⁷² After Daniel Ortega traveled to Moscow in June 1985 to ask the Soviets for more aid, the U.S. House of Representatives appropriated \$27 million in humanitarian aid to the Contras.⁷³ Despite great concerns of human rights abuses by the Contra, the House was ultimately convinced

⁶⁹ Luis Fley (nom de guerre "Comandante Johnson"). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

⁷⁰ Edén Pastora Gomez (nom de guerre "Comandante Cero"). Interview on May 3, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua.

⁷¹ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 64

⁷² Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 140

⁷³ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 163

to approve \$100 million in funding to the Contras in June 1986, \$70 million of which was allocated to weaponry and, to appease Congress's worries, \$3 million was to go to human rights training. This plan allowed the CIA to again work directly with the Contras to plan strategy and conduct military operations.⁷⁴ The "\$100 million offensive" sustained the Contras through the beginning of 1988, when the Reagan administration unsuccessfully went back to Congress to ask for more funds in February. In March 1988, Congress approved \$17.7 million to the Contras solely for food, clothing, and other survival supplies. A month later, the State Department's Agency for International Development (AID) took over administration of the Contras from the CIA, turning the once secret program public.⁷⁵ Despite being legally prohibited from continuing relations with the Contra forces, the CIA continued to fund the army until 1990 and the political directorate until July 1989.⁷⁶

Contra Perceptions of the United States

Of the former FDN Contras I interviewed, nearly all of them asserted that the United States was not giving the Contras very much aid and that the majority of the funds they received was allocated to "humanitarian" purposes. They claimed that U.S. assistance went mostly to food, medicine, uniforms, boots, training, and recruitment for the Contra troops, and even to food, medicine, agricultural supplies, and seeds for the civilian population. Families of Contra soldiers that had fled to Honduras for fear of being killed by the Sandinistas also were given monetary and material assistance. Most of my interviewees admitted that the United States also provided weapons, helicopters, and

⁷⁴ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 167

⁷⁵ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 227-228

⁷⁶ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 228

advanced military technology to the army, but they all maintained that it was never enough to achieve a military victory.

It seemed that a common sentiment among interviewees was that the war was an entirely Nicaraguan conflict that required monetary support from whatever source was willing to provide it. They firmly believed in the necessity to “liberate Nicaragua” from the repressive Soviet-backed Sandinista government and were therefore keen on aligning with the sympathetic United States. Many interviewees recognized that they were part of the larger international fight between Communism and Democracy,⁷⁷ but they maintained that their motivations for fighting were much more domestic-focused. Thus, the United States was not entirely “using” the Contras to fight their own war against the Soviet Union; rather, the relationship between the United States and the Contras was more of a confluence of interests in which both groups wanted to depose the Sandinistas but for different reasons. As Azucena Ferrey aptly articulated the Contra War dynamic, “the arms were the United States’ and the Soviets’, but the dead were ours.”⁷⁸

Moral Considerations

In this section I will focus only on the FDN portion of the Contra forces since it was the largest faction of *La Resistencia* and was most heavily funded by the United States. I am aware of some human rights considerations taken by ARDE and YATAMA, but my interviews of fighters associated with those armies did not yield sufficient information about the subject to warrant inclusion in this section.

⁷⁷ I use this term because my interviewees spoke about the opposite of “Communism” as “Democracy,” whereas I would tend to describe the opposite as “Capitalism.”

⁷⁸ Azucena Ferrey. Interview on May 1, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua. Translation by author.

In attempting to assess the moral role of the United States in funding the Contra army, I became interested in investigating the human rights-related concerns of military strategists and policymakers in the United States and military authorities in Nicaragua. The Contras were believed in Nicaragua, as well as in the United States, to be frequent human rights violators, with numerous reports from independent sources of individual civilian murders and full town massacres. In 1985, for example, U.S. lawyer Reed Brody compiled evidence of 28 different instances of Contra violence against civilians, which he separated by type of violence, including: attacks on coffee pickers, attacks on farms and villages, attacks on civilian vehicles, kidnappings, and rapes.⁷⁹ Additionally, the U.S. Congress was wary of funding the Contras because of the army's poor human rights record.⁸⁰ Many former Contras whom I interviewed, however, claimed that the Sandinista government spread much propaganda about Contra abuses so that the civilian population would not support them, when in reality the FDN soldiers were just simple, idealistic campesinos. According to Comandante Johnson, human rights were only taken into consideration beginning in 1986 when the United States allocated funding to that purpose; beforehand, Contra troops "fought freely" without any restrictions from written codes of conduct, formal classes, or a military justice tribunal.⁸¹

United States Legal Policy

In terms of U.S. policy, a human rights consideration made by the United States was to place conditions on the aid they were giving the Contras. Nearly every person I

⁷⁹ Reed Brody. *Contra Terror in Nicaragua: Report of a Fact-finding Mission, September 1984-January 1985*. Boston, MA: South End, 1985.

⁸⁰ Sam Dillon. *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. Page 197

⁸¹ Luis Fley (nom de guerre "Comandante Johnson"). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua. Translation by author.

interviewed claimed that the United States required the Contras to respect the human rights of civilians and Sandinista prisoners in order to continue receiving monetary assistance. Furthermore, the U.S. State Department made a rule that individuals found to have violated human rights during the war were not allowed to reside in the United States. In practice, however, this statute was not completely enforced because of the constant infighting between the State Department, the Security Council, and the CIA.⁸²

Human Rights Classes

The United States also had a policy to teach Contras about the necessity of protecting human rights through formal courses. Former Contra Germán Zeledón, who trained to be a commander at a U.S. military base in North Carolina in 1984, explained that part of the mandatory training for all soldiers was to attend “*civismo*” (“civic”) classes. These courses were focused on teaching about the Contra identity, reasons for fighting against the Sandinistas, the contemporary political situation, relations with the civil population, and human rights issues. Zeledón said that the United States instructors taught Contra troops to be organized, nicely dressed and well behaved in order to appear as good personal examples to inspire confidence in their forces among civilians.⁸³

Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos (ANPDH)

Part of the \$3 million set aside by the United States in 1986 for human rights issues went to the establishment of the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights (Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos, ANPDH). Assistance for the

⁸² Luis Fley (nom de guerre “Comandante Johnson”). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

⁸³ Germán Zeledón (nom de guerre “El Enano”). Interview on April 25, 2012. Jinotega, Nicaragua.

organization also came from small North American human rights organizations and individuals concerned with the cause, an international committee from the European Union, and the international Red Cross, though it was run entirely by Nicaraguans. According to the executive director of the ANPDH, Roberto Petray, the organization was originally created to monitor Contra activity in the mountains and investigate alleged human rights abuses.⁸⁴ Part of the work of the ANPDH, in addition to investigating reported Contra violations, was to train and place one soldier (called a “*compañía*”) in every troop of 20 men to watch out for human rights abuses within the ranks.

Code of Conduct

According to Comandante Johnson, the first version of the Contra code of conduct, the Blue and White Book (*El Libro Azul y Blanco*), was written by a member of the political directorate of the FDN in 1983. The second version, the Combatant Manual (*El Manual del Combatiente*),⁸⁵ was written in 1985 by a former National Guard lawyer who had served under Somoza. Neither of these versions was distributed to troops until 1986 when the ANPDH was established, at which point they were improved upon and then circulated in human rights training classes.⁸⁶ The international Red Cross also contributed to the development of the human rights literature, which addressed issues such as the moral treatment of civilians and war prisoners. A few individuals with whom I spoke proudly asserted that the Contras were the first guerrilla movement in history to have a code of conduct at all. Former Contra Germán Zeledón explained that it was important to honor human rights for three main reasons: to show the Nicaraguan people

⁸⁴ Roberto Petray Interview on April 23, 2012. Esteli, Nicaragua.

⁸⁵ See Appendix for full Manual Del Combatiente.

⁸⁶ Luis Fley (nom de guerre “Comandante Johnson”). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

“that we were a legitimate force,” to show the international community that “the Contras are people who don’t violate human rights,” and to convince the United States Congress that it should continue sending aid.⁸⁷

Nicaraguan Legal Enforcement

In order to enforce human rights regulations, the United States established a Nicaraguan-run 15-person Contra legal office in 1986 to investigate the human rights “denunciations” about which the U.S. Congress learned.⁸⁸ Part the project was also to create a military justice tribunal to investigate reports of abuses and to punish perpetrators appropriately. According to the president of the tribunal, Maximino Rodriguez, the U.S. organization America Watch worked closely with the tribunal to ensure that human rights were honored even in counterintelligence operations. He explained that if an individual was reported to have infringed on the rights of civilians or prisoners, the tribunal would analyze the veracity of the claim and the magnitude of damage done and would then respond by either monitoring, sanctioning, or expelling the abuser.⁸⁹ Comandante Johnson, the Contra army’s chief legal prosecutor, explained that if the *compañía*, the ANPDH accompanying soldier, discovered a violation among his troop, he would go to the head of the platoon (the “*jefe*”), who would then seek out Comandante Johnson in the Contra army’s legal office. If the violation were determined to be true, Comandante Johnson would speak with the commander of the unit about a suitable punishment. In addition to monitoring or expelling the abuser, Comandante

⁸⁷ Germán Zeledón (nom de guerre “El Enano”). Interview on April 25, 2012. Jinotega, Nicaragua. Translations by author.

⁸⁸ Luis Fley (nom de guerre “Comandante Johnson”). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

⁸⁹ Maximino Rodriguez (nom de guerre “Comandante Wilmer”). Interview on May 2, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

Johnson asserted that the abuser could be transferred to a different location or, in extreme cases, imprisoned.⁹⁰

Difficulties in Practice

Despite the Contras' sincere attempts to teach and enforce rules of military engagement, war conditions predictably made adherence difficult and sometimes impossible. Comandante Rubén, for example, explained that fighting as a guerrilla army meant that the Contras did not have real prisons in which to hold captured Sandinistas, as was required by international laws of combat. Similarly, troops did not always have sufficient supplies to feed their prisoners for three to four days since they required the limited provisions for their own survival. Furthermore, Comandante Rubén asserted that many situations that presented themselves in reality were not addressed in the code of conduct, so commanders were forced to "improvise" their enforcement. He explained that he would often practice the unofficial policy of "*dar de va*," ("let go"), allowing a prisoner to go free "so that he wouldn't become an enemy."⁹¹ Róger Espinoza Coronel likewise expressed the difficulty of adhering strictly to a code of conduct in war situations because at the time all civilians were considered either Sandinistas or Contras, so soldiers were forced to quickly decide who was an ally and who constituted a potential threat. He also claimed that the campesinos in the FDN respected civilians' human rights more than the ex-Guardia in the FDN because they were more familiar with the campo population.⁹²

⁹⁰ Luis Fley (nom de guerre "Comandante Johnson"). Interview on May 7, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua

⁹¹ Oscar Manuel Salbavarro Garcia (nom de guerre "Comandante Rubén). Interview on April 18, 2012. Managua, Nicaragua. Translation by author.

⁹² Róger Espinoza Coronel (nom de guerre "Ranchero"). Interview on April 24, 2012. Esteli, Nicaragua.

Legal Repercussions on the United States

In 1984, Nicaragua brought a case against the United States in the international Court of Justice (ICJ) concerning the military and paramilitary activities in and against Nicaragua. In its judgment on June 27, 1986, the court found the United States in violation of numerous “customary international laws” and rejected the U.S. “justification of collective self-defense” concerning its actions in Nicaragua.

Below are some of the key decisions made by the ICJ in its ruling:⁹³

(3) *Decides* that the United States of America, by training, arming, equipping, financing and supplying the *contra* forces or otherwise encouraging, supporting and aiding military and paramilitary activities in and against Nicaragua, has acted, against the Republic of Nicaragua, in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to intervene in the affairs of another State;

(5) *Decides* that the United States of America, by directing or authorizing over Rights of Nicaraguan territory... has acted, against the Republic of Nicaragua, in breach of its obligation under customary international law not to violate the sovereignty of another State;

(6) *Decides* that, by laying mines in the internal or territorial waters of the Republic of Nicaragua during the first months of 1984, the United States of America has acted, against the Republic of Nicaragua, in breach of its obligations under customary

⁹³ International Court of Justice. Summary of the Summary of the Judgment of 27 June 1986. Case concerning the Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America). <http://www.icjci.org/docket/index.php?sum=367&code=nus&p1=3&p2=3&case=70&k=66&p3=5>. Accessed on May 7, 2012.

international law not to use force against another State, not to intervene in its affairs, not to violate its sovereignty and not to interrupt peaceful maritime commerce;

(10) *Decides* that the United States of America, by the attacks on Nicaraguan territory... and by declaring a general embargo on trade with Nicaragua on 1 May 1985, has committed acts calculated to deprive of its object and purpose the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation between the Parties signed at Managua on 21 January 1956;

(12) *Decides* that the United States of America is under a duty immediately to cease and to refrain from all such acts as may constitute breaches of the foregoing legal obligations;

(13) *Decides* that the United States of America is under an obligation to make reparation to the Republic of Nicaragua for all injury caused to Nicaragua by the breaches of obligations under customary international law enumerated above;

Final Reflections

Over the course of my research, I have learned that when writing about history or politics or war, every word carries a bias. Asserting the truth of an event may either legitimize or delegitimize a movement, or even an entire ideology. Even “outsiders,” who have not lived the history about which they write, are partisan—they come with their own notions of how the world should work, of justices and injustices committed, and of tolerable and intolerable actions. Most of these biases, I believe, come from only seeing—or only focusing on—part of the larger story, yet our inability to see “the whole picture” is in turn limited by who we are. Our own lived experiences, whether

consciously chosen or not, form our modes of thinking and cause us to favor one perspective or another. Moreover, not only are there infinitely many parts to every story, but every individual part carries with it a unique combination of human truths, falsehoods, exaggerations, hopes, egos, and fears.

So how can we decipher what is “truth” and what is “propaganda”? Are we to trust the many books published about the justice of the cause of each side, whose authors also write from within a particular bias? Are we to take at face value the pure, heartfelt stories of the soldiers who earnestly fought for the betterment of their society?

Those of us on the “outside” have the privilege of analyzing various sides from a safe distance and are able to refrain from ascribing rightness or wrongness to any singular action. Although it may seem like a cop-out not to align with any group, I believe that greater intellectual progress can be made by recognizing the challenges present in each particular situation so that we may learn from those past dynamics.

One particular lesson I have confronted throughout this research is the notion that nothing in this world—the physical realm—is perfect. As expressed through Plato’s forms in *The Republic*, things can only maintain their perfection in the realm of ideas. No theory or ideology once put into practice will ever be completely satisfactory, and people will always strive for something better. In actuality, even if one system is “working,” some people will be left out, will be relatively worse off than others, or will be dissatisfied for any number of reasons. The lack of practicable perfection inevitably allows room for improvement—a fact that may be exploited or exaggerated by naysayers who attempt to define an entire ideology by its imperfections. In the case of the Contra War, for example, many counterrevolutionaries came to identify all of the mistakes of the

Socialist-leaning revolutionary government with “Communism” without recognizing the problems of alternative systems as well. In reality, however, every governmental and economic system is a mixture of details that are drawn from different, sometimes seemingly opposing, ideologies.

In situations of violent conflict, such as war, the concept of “something better” is also at play. In war, regardless of how well rules of engagement are followed and how many precautions are taken to ensure the security of non-combatants, innocent people will die. Whether due to error, ill will, poor training, greed, or happenstance, civilians will suffer when arms are introduced into a population in conflict. The notion of “improvement” therefore allows for criticism of every army, for many argue that any military-inflicted civilian deaths render the army completely immoral or inhumane. Such demonizing of the opposition only serves to restrict dialogue between the parties in conflict who may each maintain legitimate concerns, such as in the example of the Contras concerning their perceptions of harmful governmental policy.

In looking to the future, I believe that it is necessary to recognize the realities of war so that we do not immediately delegitimize the grievances of our opposition when we suffer civilian casualties. If armed forces do not feel heard, then we can never hope for a nonviolent resolution to the conflict. Furthermore, in striving to improve our eternally imperfect society, we must bear in mind that there will always be more work to do. Thus, instead of throwing out a broken system to replace it with different, yet equally problematic, system, it may be preferable to work to understand the points of inadequacy within the existing system and attempt to patch them. After considering all of the issues raised by my research, the question with which I am now struggling is this: If one feels

that his or her rights are being violated and there is no political mechanism by which to negotiate, is it advisable, or at least morally permissible, to pick up arms and fight?

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Appendix